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Technology-Rich Learning

Before You Buy Those iPads

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Schools considering starting a 1:1 iPad program need to consider both the benefits and the challenges.

Like many educators, Pete Pullen, head of school at Eton Academy, believes that it's the school's responsibility to expose students to new technologies so they will be prepared for the future. With this idea in mind, Eton, an independent school in the suburban Detroit area serving students with reading, attention, and other learning challenges, implemented a 1:1 iPad program for all their students beginning in the 2012–13 school year.

Although hundreds of public and private schools have already begun using iPads, there is not yet a great deal of research about the use of these devices in schools. Eton contacted me to do research about iPads after the school had decided to begin a 1:1 program but before the program had been implemented. I helped organize resources for teachers and gathered perspectives from other schools and districts that had been through the same process. My work with Eton, the existing literature, and personal accounts from teachers and administrators at numerous schools reveal some of the benefits and challenges of using this technology in the classroom.

Why iPads?

Perhaps the most commonly cited benefit of bringing iPads into the classroom is their practicality. They are easily portable, have a long battery life, and start up quickly. With iPads, teachers and students reduce clutter, carry fewer items, and virtually eliminate misplaced assignments. Stephen Braunius, the director of instructional technology for the Zeeland, Michigan, school district, said that school offices in his district reduced interruptions and paperwork when calling students to the office by sending them an e-mail on their iPads, which the students then show to their teacher and use as a hall pass.

Another benefit is that iPads are intuitive. They allow students to interact directly with the screen, which is particularly beneficial for young children and students with disabilities (Valentino-DeVries, 2010). Melanie Broxterman, a K–2 intervention specialist in Ohio, explains: "My classroom consists of students with multiple disabilities. Many struggle with fine and gross motor skills, which make using a laptop or desktop computer challenging." The touch technology of the iPad poses fewer problems for such students.

In addition, iPads include many built-in features, such as text-to-speech, speech-to-text, and magnification, that make the technology accessible for people with disabilities. Many iPad apps are dedicated to helping people with specific disabilities. iPads have been found to be especially helpful for some students with attention deficit hyperactivity

disorder (McClanahan, Williams, Kennedy, & Tate, 2012). When all students in a school have iPads, many students with special needs will have the support they need without specialized technology that would have made them stand out from their peers.

General education and special education teachers alike appreciate how the iPad can help them create individualized learning plans for students. Teachers can tailor the curriculum to meet students exactly where they are. Students can access content using text, sound, images, and video anywhere, anytime.

Finally, using iPads can empower students because iPads "put access to information and creation right into users' hands" (Crichton, Pegler, & White, 2012, p. 24). Students can quickly get answers to factual questions by consulting a dictionary, thesaurus, translator, maps, or other resources. Some teachers have found that students ask more and deeper questions when they have access to electronic lecture notes (Fons, 2010).

Challenges and Drawbacks

Despite the many advantages of using iPads in the classroom, problems will inevitably arise when using technology on a wide scale, and educators need to think ahead about how they will handle these issues.

For instance, many schools allow students to take their devices home rather than storing them in the classroom overnight. Although this policy is obviously an ideal way to extend learning beyond the school day, Stephen Braunius cautions that it introduces the possibility of damage, theft, or loss, as well as concerns from parents about Internet filtering and students spending too much time on the device. In a study of 1:1 laptop programs, researchers found that when not all students had their laptops at school (because they forgot them at home, had a dead battery, or needed a software update), activities were less successful (Donovan, Green, & Hartley, 2010).

From a teacher's perspective, finding and adding new and appropriate apps, charging iPads, and making sure all software is up-to-date can be a lot of work. But for intervention specialist Melanie Broxterman, an even bigger challenge is "having the students understand when it is 'play' time and when it is 'work' time on the iPad."

Reflecting on his experience leading his district's iPad initiative, Braunius observed that "almost everything" is difficult about beginning to use iPads in a school district. But, he continued, this is "unique, energizing work," and schools that use iPads will be on the cutting edge of education.

Questions to Ask

If your school is considering investing in iPads, there are some important questions to ask as you prepare for this big change.

Is the iPad the best fit for our instructional goals? Although there is a great deal of hype surrounding iPads, technology should not be used simply because it is available. Stephen Braunius recommends that districts determine their goals for the new technology, as well as their expectations for how it should be used in and out of school.

Is the iPad doing things we could not do without it? Are we replacing aspects of instruction that are already effective? An iPad can be a great tool, but it is just a tool; it should not replace what worked before. When learning to type, a desktop computer is the proper tool. And when refining handwriting or learning to paint, you can't beat paper and pencils or brushes. An iPad, however, is invaluable for helping students collaborate on joint projects in which they create videos, comic strips, graphs, or diagrams to show what they are learning.

How can we prepare teachers? Do not assume that young teachers know how to use the technology; everyone can use some support. All teachers benefit from having the opportunity to use a new piece of technology before teaching with it. Consider having one or more teachers receive extra training so that they can serve as peer leaders. A number of districts have piloted their iPad program in one or two classrooms before expanding the program to the rest of the school.

How will we prepare students? Students of all ages need to be taught how to use the technology appropriately in different contexts. If one of the goals of integrating iPads into the classroom is preparing students for an increasingly technological world, then the extra time dedicated to teaching and learning about the technology should be well worth the effort.

How can we involve parents? Parent involvement is crucial, yet often overlooked. If possible, parents should be involved from the earliest stages so that they have input on decisions and learn how they can support their children at home.

How can the iPad facilitate a more student-centered approach? Second grade teacher Amber Kowatch said that the most important change she has made since starting to use iPads in her classroom is giving students more control:

For so long, teachers have driven the bus and owned all control of the resources and content in the classroom. Kids are far smarter than we give them credit for. Allowing them the opportunity to own their own learning and drive that bus will take you to places that you didn't know existed!

But although the iPad has great potential for enabling students to discover and create their own knowledge, many apps are designed for student drill or consumption (Murray & Olcese, 2011). Teachers will need to be attentive to how students are using the iPads.

How can teachers get new ideas and select the best apps? Many websites offer reviews of apps and other helpful tips and tricks. The most extensive website I have found is [Kathy Schrock's Guide to Everything: iPads in the Classroom](#). This page includes tutorials, lists of apps and materials, app evaluation guides, classroom uses, professional development activities, and more. Teachers may also find it helpful to join or form a professional community of other educators who are using iPads.

Looking Ahead

Eton students and teachers have taken eagerly to their new devices. Teachers of different grades and subjects have found their own unique ways of using the iPad to meet their students' needs.

It will take time for members of the Eton community to see major results will, but Pete Pullen and his staff look forward to the big changes ahead. Although aware that there will be difficulties, they are optimistic about the iPad's potential to revolutionize how teachers teach and how students learn. Other schools and districts should think carefully about their goals, priorities, and hopes for the future, and decide whether beginning a 1:1 iPad program is the right choice.

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